Body Theology

By

David Titterington

Submitted to the graduate degree program in Painting and the Graduate Faculty of the University of Kansas in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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Chairperson Judith McCrea

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Tanya Hartman

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Norman Akers

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certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

Body Theology

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Chairperson Judith McCrea

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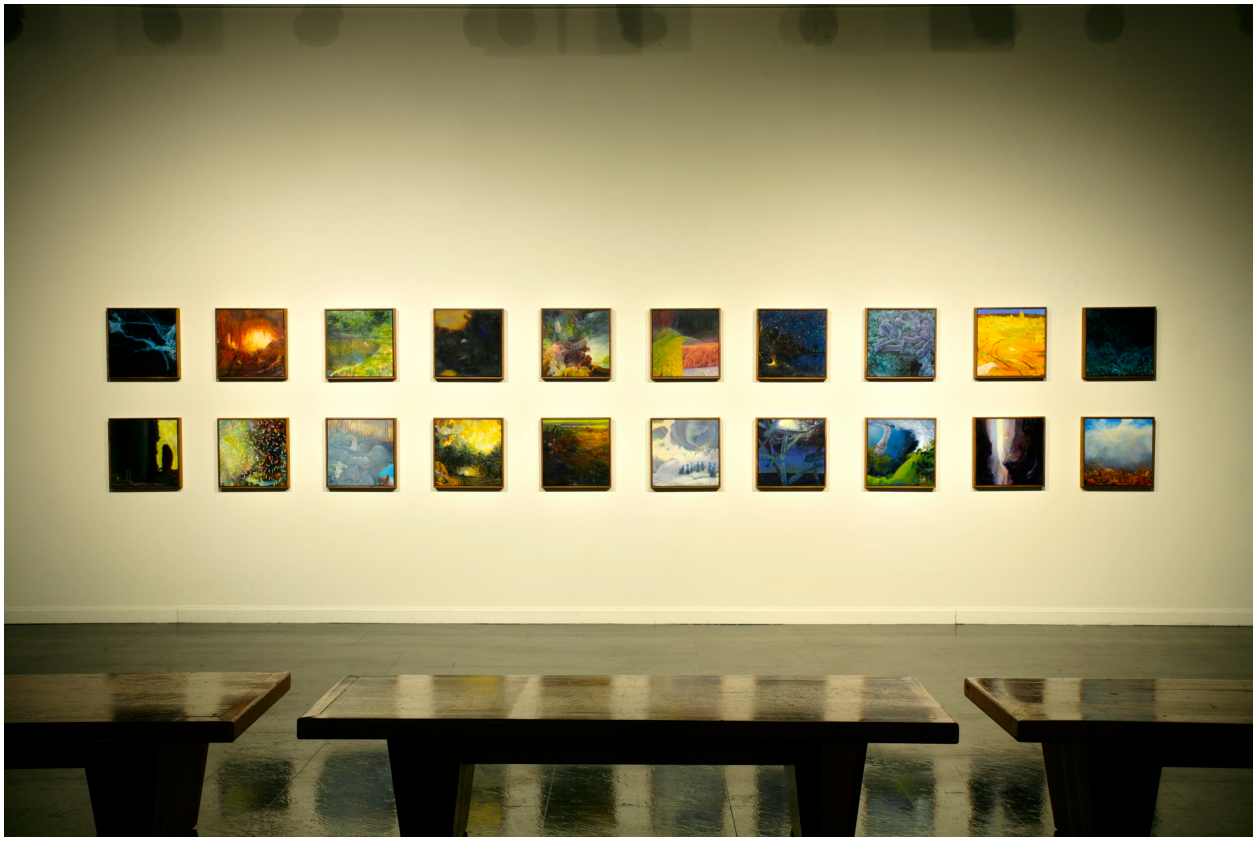
Abstract

Body Theology investigates the human body as a place where landscape, myth and bacteria intersect to create numerous imaginary realms. Horizon lines shift or disappear completely, and the overall dark palette sets a tone intended to evoke mystery. In these paintings, it may be difficult to determine whether inside is outside, up is down, big is small, or figure is ground. I embrace this ambiguity and invite the viewer to participate in a visual and metaphorical adventure.

My painting process is traditional: from a white ground, many layers of semi-transparent oil paint begin with loose and rhythmic brush strokes. I enjoy how the nature of the paint itself reflects the fluidity and luminosity found in both inner and outer worlds. I never know exactly what the finished image will look like when I begin. Unforeseen problems require creative solutions, new forms and ideas emerge from the destruction of old ones, and my own understanding of the picture evolves through formal development and intuition.



Body

Art is a communication, and my deepest wish is to articulate something useful. Microcosm and macrocosm are always components of human experience. Therefore, in this series, I juxtaposed the minuscule with the epic, the banal with the profound. I began each image with studies of the concrete realities of the body—its skin, bacteria, hair, fat, and fluids. I then moved into the non-objective landscape, while also understanding that the abstract and the mythical always influence our perception of "reality." The paint itself demonstrates how something can be many things at once. In this way, the landscape in conjunction with bacterial and galactic forms becomes a layered metaphor for a soulful and corporeal experience.

Michael and the Dragon

I am interested in the material, spiritual and cultural realities implicate to our bodies. I interrogate conventional images of the figure, striving to provide new ones, better ones. Through artistic responses, I can plug the imagination into a view of the body attached to something greater.

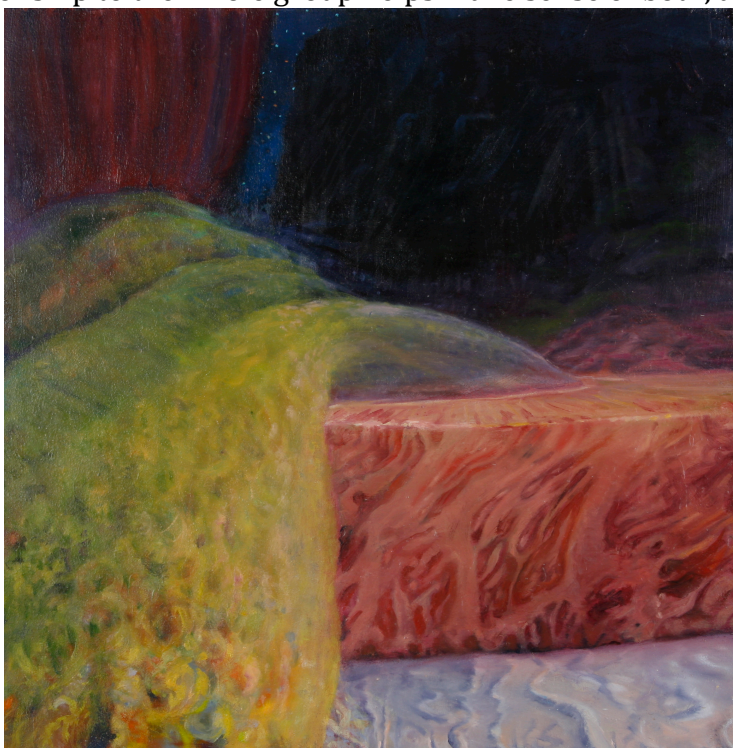
There is magic in the body and in the landscape.

Evocations of shimmering, irregular geographies recall the fluctuating skin and complex surfaces of our bodies. Tunnels and bumpy territories are populated with tiny denizens such as bacterium and fungus. Phallic, yonic and ambiguous forms evoke rather than describe parts of our bodies and parts of the ever-shifting environment. They are found everywhere.

Each painting is oil on a 15 by 15 inch wood panel. The twenty paintings that compose *Body Theology* are arranged in two rows of ten paintings each. Arranging the paintings in a grid does two things: it encourages the viewer to step back and thus it brings attention to the empty spaces between the paintings. The tunneling spaces presented in the work pull the viewer's body into what art critic Dave Hickey calls 'vaginal space'[1], while the grid's phallic, intrusive presence pushes them back. This push/pull is how the installation can interact

[1] See *Prom Night in Flatland: On the Gender of Works of Art* in *The Invisible Dragon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009).

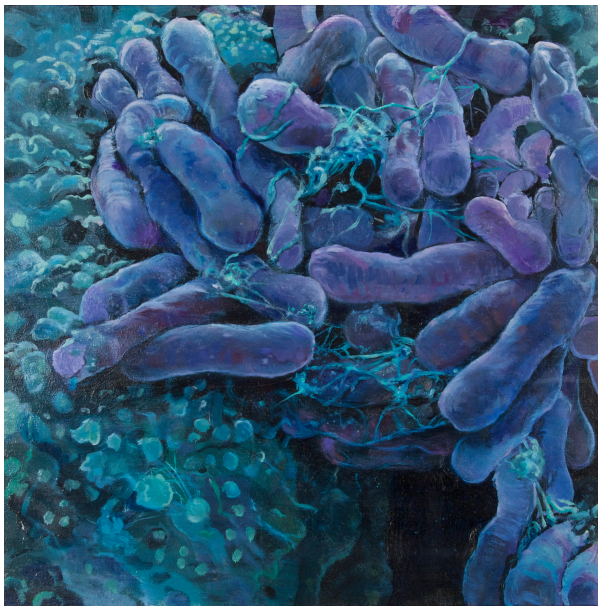
with the viewer, and encourage an experience of being both the beholder and the beheld. Stepping back also helps the eyes blend the brushwork together, enabling the surface to momentarily disappear and illusory space to emerge. I arranged the paintings together onto one wall because I needed to be able to see all the information in all the paintings all at once. Seeing each painting in relationship to the whole group helps make sense of both, and extends the metaphor of individual cell-like parts within a larger body. It creates a multi-panel discussion and a single, all-over composition. Art critic Clement Greenburg talks about how the `all-over' painter weaves his picture into a tight mesh whose "scheme of unity is recapitulated at every point."[2] I believe he is describing a kind of *Indra's Net* or holographic perspective that recognizes 'the ocean in the drop,' and how each element is simultaneously a whole and a part of a larger unity. Many narratives, both scientific and theological, arrive at this insight, that we are paradoxically wholes and parts of something larger. The evolutionary theorist and Jesuit Priest, Telhard de Chardin, while contemplating our bodies and the emergence of the "noosphere," proposed the idea that hypercollectivization leads to hyperpersonalization.[3] In other words, the large energizes the little, just as the atmosphere energizes the flame.[4] By viewing the series all at once, each painting, and each element within each painting, can likewise contain the presence of the whole.



Persephone

[2] Greenberg: 156.
[3] de Chardin: 254-272.
[4] Thompson: 7.

I enjoy composing within a square substructure. It is used in Buddhist mandalas, and the square shape implies an internal grid or symmetry. This format for organizing information is prehistoric, evidenced in The Woman of Willendorf's hat, and in the gridding out of land in agriculture. It is also 'posthistoric,' evidenced in the recapitulation of the grid in modern avant-garde art. Art Historian Rosalind Krauss calls the grid anti-narrative, anti-historical, antinatural, antimimetic, and antireal[5]—a cogent contrast, in the case of *Body Theology*, to the organic, narrative, 'natural' forms appearing within. Krauss notes too that for the modernist, 'theosophist'[6] painters, such as Mondrian and Malevich, the grid is spiritual, transcendent, "a staircase to the Universal." Her ideas about the modernist painter's intuition reiterate my own beliefs about the grid, that it is always imaginary, which is one reason I decided to integrate it into the structure of the installation. I also respect the modernist painter's sincere devotion to the mystical.



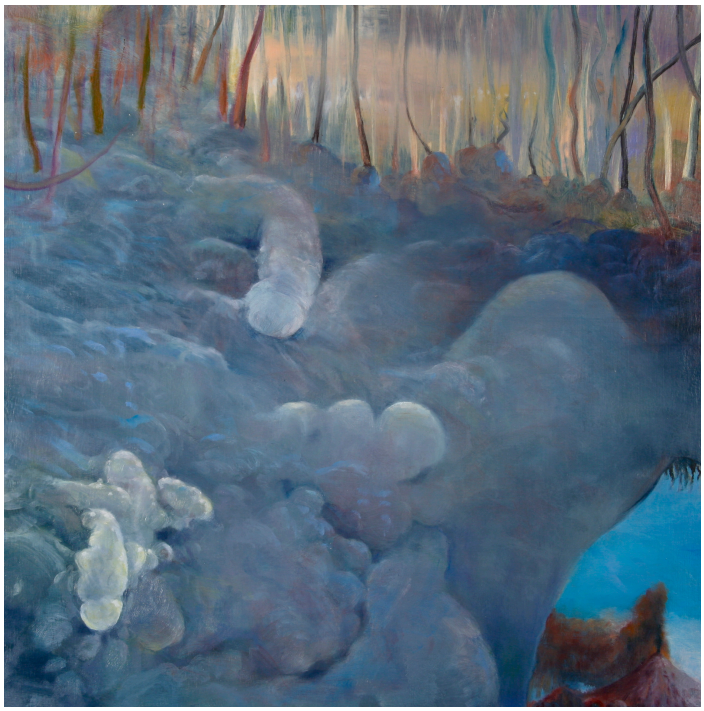
Gatherings

Some of the spaces and forms used in the paintings were lifted from SEM photographs of common human gastric and epidermic bacteria. Ecologists and New Age health and spiritual teachers have been emphasizing these 'micro-ecologies' for years. The cover of the June 2012 issue of Scientific America depicts a human constructed entirely out of bacteria with the subtitle, "In your body, bacteria outnumber your own cells 10-1. Who's in control?" We now know that the tiny microbes on our skin and in our gut protect us, regulate important chemicals and hormones, eat the poisons from of our food, and even encode compounds that the body cannot make on its own. They produce hundreds of

[5] Rosalind Krauss: "Grids," October **9** (Summer 1979)
[6] Theosophy had a profound effect on the emergence of modern abstract art and specifically on the founding fathers of the movement: Wassily Kandinsky, Frantisek Kupka, Piet Mondrian, and Kazimer Malevich.

neurochemicals, including dopamine, which affect the state of our consciousness. Just last year we found 1,458 new species of bacteria living in the bellybutton.[7] This contemporary scientific view interrogates our ordinary sense of having a separate, individual 'human' body, and reinforces the notion that each one of us is a team, mostly made out of non-human entities. I intended the installation to reflect upon this insight.

I like how some cultures blur the line between sacred spaces and the human body. In Japan, for example, where I lived for five years, the shrines that I often visited were demarcated by special ropes, the same ropes used in the ceremonial belts of sumo wrestlers. From these belts hang paper lightning bolts. Shrines and temples in Japan are also demarcated by a series of portals, gates, and water fountains, not unlike the mouth and anus of our bodies.

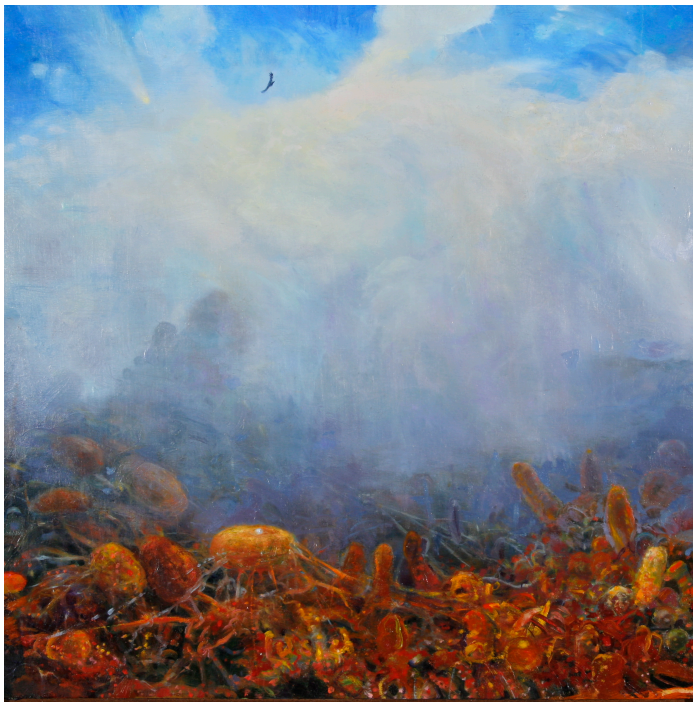


Pits

My research into the complexities surrounding the bodily experience keeps running into the signification of the landscape, cultural archetypes, and our orifices. For example, as upright beings, the horizon line becomes the limits of our horizontal vision of the earth, and therefore a sign for unknowing, for space, and for an imaginary place separating the sky from the earth, the light from the dark, the clean from the dirty, the living from the dead.[8] The horizon line migrates onto our bodies as a belt-line, separating 'above' from 'below.' Our reactions to and understanding of the sky as the source of light, air, water, and electricity may be

[7] See the Belly Button Biodiversity (BBB) project, which shows how everyone's bellybutton ecology is unique like a fingerprint. One volunteer's belly button harbored bacteria that had previously been found only in soil from Japan, where he had never been.
[8] Tilley: 6, Lacoff and Johnson: 16.

encoded in our genes, and electrical storms and star forms in space may be responsible for much of our ancient mythos.[9] Derrida's metanarrative recognizes how the concept of a sign, within modern linguistics, is essentially theological, dealing with psychic interiority and 'natural resemblances.'[10] Light, air, wind, and sky connote the sacred, and places such as sacred mountains associated with clean air always tend to be privileged culturally and emotionally, while places situated down below tend to be associated with darkness, moisture, filth, and death.[11] We construct much of our personal and cultural narratives based on these associations.



Medusa

Mud, water, clouds, stone, moss, meat, these are forms and textures that intrigue me and find their way into my paintings. All textures hold various kinds of personal and cultural significance. For example, many traditions maintain that dirt is the material from which the first humans were made.[12] Chthon (earth) and epichthnios (human) are etymologically connected, as is humus (soil) and homo (man) in Latin. Adam comes from the Hebrew word clod, meaning a clump of dirt, and the microcosm of all dirt is linked to the whole globe within the word "earth."[13] Dirt is also associated with filth and with feces, even with chaos and disorder.[14]

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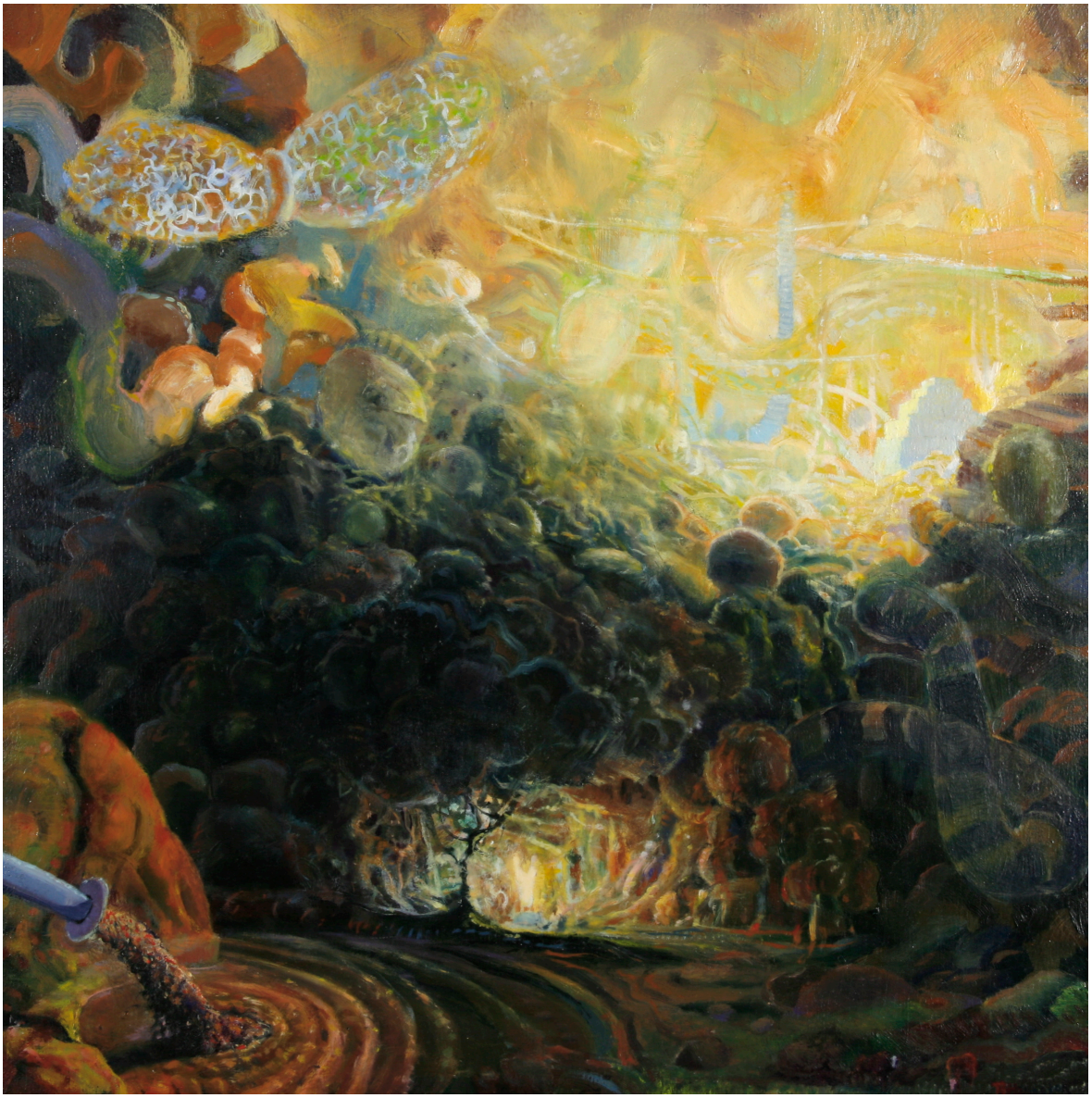
[9] For discussions on the astronomical dimension to myth, see von Dechend's *Hamlets Mill* (1998), and Talbott and Thornhill's *Thunderbolts of the Gods* (2005).
[10] Derrida: 31-33.
[11] Abram: 227, Tilley: 6, Bourdieu: 3, Lacoff and Johnson: 15.
[12] Boivin 2004: 5, Solnit: 152.
[13] Solnit: 152. The popular and probable 'panspermia' hypothesis also maintains that original life came from a rock that traveled through space and landed on earth.
[14] Douglas, 1966.



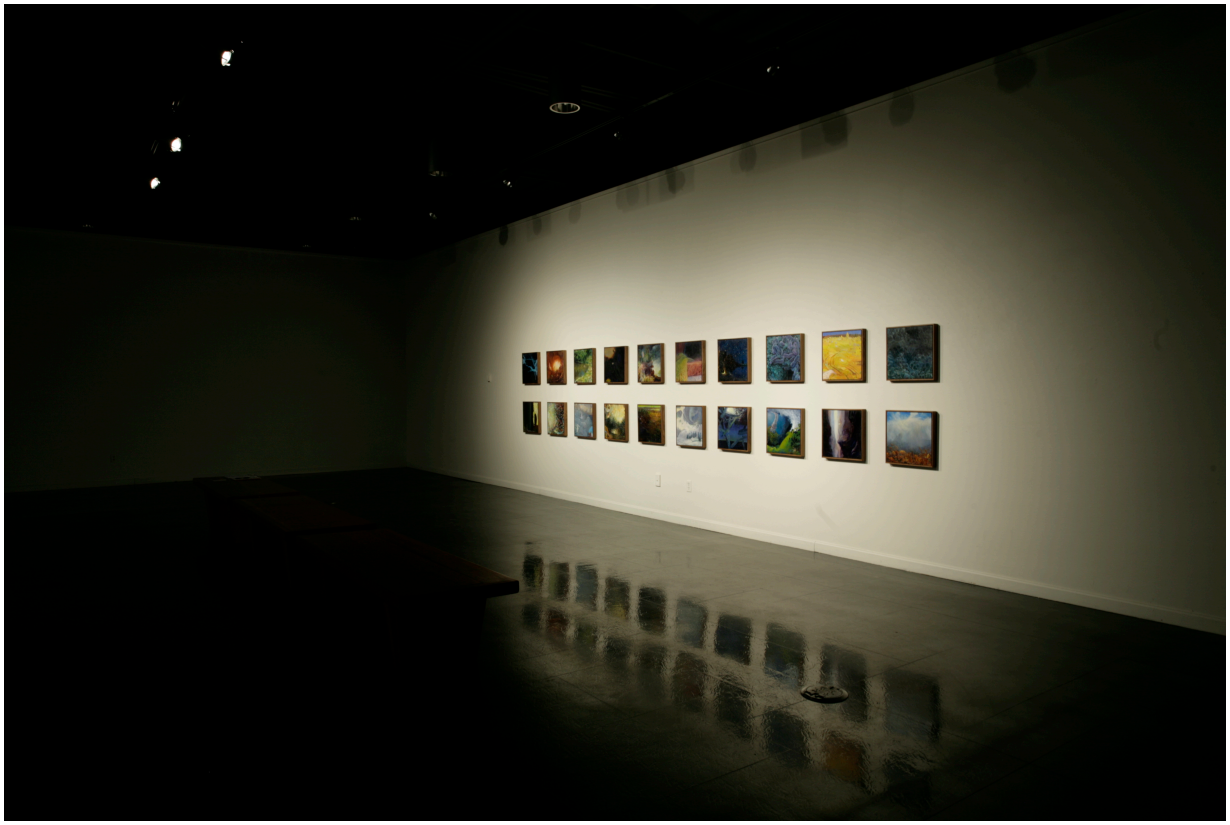
Expulsion

The bodily experiences of landscapes are at least partially material, objective, and therefore universal.[15] What is universal may be called transpersonal, or 'archetypal,' in the Jungian sense; it is that more-than-human place we share with others. Lines between imagination and our material reality are blurring. Now it is widely accepted that subject and object, mind and matter, human and landscape co-constitute each other.[16] The seemingly

[15] Tilley: 29, Strang: 97.
[16] Hodder: 155.

irretrievable wedge between the material world and the human mind, placed there by habitual, Cartesian thinking, is finally being dissolved.[17]

Within *Body Theology*, the reciprocity of imagination and landscape, of minds and bodies, of art and life implies that the mythic, theological narratives we find in our stories are not merely poetic descriptions of a certain world, but material performances of one as well. Suddenly, we are the archetypes, ancient, breathing, itching, and dripping. Suddenly, we are teams of beings gazing at ourselves through the magic mirror of painting. And maybe, just for a moment, we are dreaming bodies, mouths and anuses, stars and synapses, figures and grounds mixing to make worlds.



[17] Olsen: 64.

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